

Commentary on Matthew 5:13-26 **By L.G. Parkhurst, Jr.**

The **International Bible Lesson** (*Uniform Sunday School Series*) for **Sunday, November 6, 2011**, is from **Matthew 5:17-26**. For the sake of background and context, **Matthew 5:13-16** is included below (which you may or may not choose to use in your teaching). Five **Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further** follow the verse by verse [*International Bible Lesson Commentary*](#) below. The **Study Hints for Thinking Further**, which are also available on the [Bible Lesson Forum](#), will aid teachers in class preparation and in conducting class discussion.

Matthew 5:13-16 [Optional Verses]

(Matthew 5:13) “**You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.**”

Salt will enhance flavor and preserve food when properly prepared. Jesus’ followers will make the earth a better place to live by teaching people about Jesus and His message. If salt becomes tasteless or ineffective because of impurities, it has lost its value and will be useless for its intended purpose. Jesus’ followers must maintain a pure, Biblical faith and life

based on His teachings to help others come to faith in Jesus and obedience to Him.

(Matthew 5:14) “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.

Light enables us to see where we should go and helps us avoid stumbling and falling. Light enables us to live. The word “light” sometimes means “truth.” Jesus said that He was the light of the world, the truth, and the life (see John 8:12 and John 14:6). God revealed the truth He wants people to live by. Jesus makes His followers into people who can share the truth the world needs in order to live. The light of Jesus and His followers cannot be hidden (see John 3:21).

(Matthew 5:15) No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.

Jesus came as the light of the world (see John 12:46). Jesus has given light to His followers and they become “children of light” (see John 12:36). God has not hidden the truth about himself or how He wants us to live, but God has given light or truth to the world through Jesus and His followers in a way for all to see. In the house of God, people can learn the truth about Jesus and how to follow Him as they pray, study, trust, and obey the Bible’s teachings.

(Matthew 5:16) In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

This command of Jesus is similar to His statement: “But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God” (John 3:21). Jesus also warned that not everyone will give glory to God when they see the good works of His followers: “And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19). Indeed, Jesus said that some who followed Him would be persecuted (see Matthew 5:10-12). The motivation of Jesus’ followers for doing good works should be to give glory to their Father in heaven and for others to give glory to God too.

Matthew 5:17-26 [Uniform Lesson Verses]

(Matthew 5:17) “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.

The moral law (the Law of Love and the Ten Commandments, for example) and the ceremonial law (the laws regarding feasts and sacrifices, for example) revealed through Moses and applied and interpreted through the prophets in the Bible were fulfilled by

Jesus (with some still to be fulfilled after He comes again). Jesus perfectly obeyed the laws of the Bible, but not the traditions of the scribes and Pharisees, when He lived on earth. By His sacrificial death on the cross, He fulfilled what the prophets foretold; and being without sin, He suffered the consequences that the law demanded upon law breakers and sinners.

(Matthew 5:18) For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

All will be accomplished after Jesus Christ comes again. He fulfilled many of the ceremonial laws. For example, because of His sacrificial death, we no longer need to make ceremonial sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins. The Law of Love (the requirement that people love God and others) will never pass away and Jesus' followers will love God and others whether they live on earth or in heaven. Jesus' followers will actually "love, because they love," and not "try to love, because they do not love" just because the law commands them to love God and others.

(Matthew 5:19) Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

To “break” means to “disobey.” No one should disobey or teach anyone to disobey the moral law (the Law of Love as interpreted by Jesus) or what may seem to be the least of the moral laws. No one should disregard the meaning of the ceremonial laws, because Jesus fulfilled many of the ceremonial laws (as interpreted by Jesus and the New Testament). Some may claim to be followers of Jesus in the kingdom of heaven, but they actually try to teach people to distrust the teachings of the Bible and Jesus. When His followers teach people to trust in Jesus and His teachings, they are considered great in the kingdom of heaven.

(Matthew 5:20) For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Many of the scribes and Pharisees did not love God or their neighbors, while they insisted that they and their traditions be obeyed by Jesus, His disciples, and others. They sometimes used their traditions to set aside the law of God, to disobey the law of God, and to teach others to do the same (see Matthew 15:1-9). Because the followers of Jesus love God and others, they exceed their righteousness and enter the kingdom of heaven.

(Matthew 5:21) “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not

murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’

In His sermon, Jesus used an example to illustrate what He meant in Matthew 5:20. God commanded, “You shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17). And God warned. “If you do forget the LORD your God and follow other gods to serve and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish. Like the nations that the LORD is destroying before you, so shall you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the LORD your God” (Deuteronomy 8:19). God forbid murder, but God permitted capital punishment and killing in a just war, for in the Old Testament He commanded both at times.

(Matthew 5:22) But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.

God looks upon a person’s intentions, motivations, thoughts, and words that show a lack of love for others, not just their actions. Anger can lead to insulting someone and even murder. Insulting someone can lead to a person being judged in a court of law (by the council). Calling someone a fool can lead to other mistreatments, all of which can result in deserving hell. Jesus warns His followers to give

careful attention to their thought-life and their words as well as their actions. Unjustified anger, insulting words, bullying, and name-calling are not expressions of love for others.

(Matthew 5:23) So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you,

This verse refers to a person who is justified or right in having something against you because you have done something against them or wrong. Perhaps you have committed one of the sins described in Matthew 5:22. Perhaps you have stolen from someone in violation of the civil and moral law. If so, giving a gift at the altar can be no substitute for trying to make things right as soon as possible with the person that you have sinned against. This verse does not teach that before you offer your gift at the altar you must make things right with a person who has something against you and is unjustified, for this reconciliation may be impossible to achieve and your offerings are important to God.

(Matthew 5:24) leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

You can go to your brother or sister and offer an apology and try to make things right, but this does not

mean that they will accept your efforts to make amends or forgive you. Having made the effort at reconciliation with them, you can go back to the altar and give your gift. Jesus means that we should not think that we can substitute church worship or giving offerings at church for loving our neighbor and trying to do what is loving and right to all people, especially those we have sinned against.

(Matthew 5:25) Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison.

This verse emphasizes that you have done something against someone that could land you in court or in prison. It is better to try to solve problems before they get to the point of going to court; this is especially so for a follower of Jesus who wants to love God and others and show forth Christian love. There can be civil consequences for breaking civil laws that will be enforced whether a person offers gifts to God or not. A gift to God will not bribe God to act unjustly.

(Matthew 5:26) Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

In Jesus' day, and at other times in history, a debtor could be placed in prison until he paid his debts (see Jesus' parable in Matthew 18:23-35). In some cases,

this meant that his family would need to work off his debt to get him released from prison. In the Old Testament a thief would be ordered to make restitution if he stole and pay back more than he stole as punishment (see Exodus 22:1-4). Jesus indicated that the civil law would be enforced against a lawbreaker, and his religious performance would not set aside the enforcement of a civil penalty.

Five Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further

1. How might you use Jesus' teaching in these verses to help someone who thinks that if they are a Christian then they do not need to obey the law of God?
2. Why might you say it is important or unimportant to teach Christians about the moral law and the ceremonial law?
3. How might someone exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees? Do Christians need to do this?
4. Why do you think the Bible condemns murder? What is the Biblical penalty for having committed murder? Why do you think killing someone for having committed murder is right or wrong?

5. What might you say to someone who never tries to make right any of their wrongs or make amends to anyone because they believe that since God forgives them they do not need to try to make amends or right their wrongs?

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